

The City in the Female Gender



Lia Magale

This personal and subjective reading of some writings by women is not, let it be clear, a mini-history of “feminist thought,” nor the attempt to propose an analysis of the different theories circulating in the Movement. Nor is it the reconstruction, through the words of other women, of a speech of mine on Roman feminism. What is it then?

Nothing more than statements, impressions, itineraries which are, together with so many others, memories, in the memory of feminism, in the memory of women who have lived through splendid and tiring years of revolt, rigor, intransigence, weakness. They are also my memories.

And the difficulty of clarifying a work that revealed itself only in action, only when concretely experienced, during which “a lot” and its opposite have been experienced: self-control inspired by the desire for an identity, a constant loss in the absence of desires. Committing the sin of speaking under the influence of cultural reminiscences, a synthesis reached by forgetting any language. A body loved and hated in its incessant presence. Differences put into practice, similarities loved. Power refused, fought even in its minimal creation-recreation; attraction for power. Guilty feelings, loss of inhibitions. Sexuality. Sexuality. Suspension of sexuality. Seduction in words, meaning, speech and then finally, why not, self-disclosure.

All this required the creation of another time. It has been said: “Woman’s time is woman’s time.” Tautological, or maybe another dimension, where the production of meaning does not consist of the production of exchange value, but primarily of the experimentation on oneself.

READING ONESELF IN MUSIC

On the cover of an issue of *Differences*, the magazine of the Roman collectives, there is a score by Schönberg.

“The idea came up almost by chance. We were pondering over time, on the many types of woman’s time: on work time and love time, on “free” time and “liberated” time, on research time. One of us put forward the idea of having an hourglass on the cover, an ancient instrument of timekeeping. Then musical time came to mind, perhaps just by playing on words. Someone else suggested putting the score of a Schönberg piece on the cover, a piece called “All in due time.” Later, we were not able to trace that score. In the meantime we had started discussing Schönberg, whom some of us loved, some did not, and others knew little about. It seemed that the contrasting readings offered on Schönberg were relevant to us: the drama of dissolution of tonality and the ultimate failure in the attempt to construct a new musical norm, said somebody. Others did not agree. Atonality and 12-tone music, breakdown of the old order and the impossibility of a “spontaneous” and non-painful journey towards a new order of things...”

– The women of the Center Collective

A time that invokes multiplicity...

BEING IN TOUCH WITH THE UNCONSCIOUS

“The subjugation of the feminine (in woman, naturally, but also in man) has produced a body that is no longer possessed by desires, but by the laws of marketing, by a desire that does not enter the body but is bartered in a game that reduces life to economic laws with death as its end. The destruction of the feminine is the thread that runs through and accompanies the destruction of humanity, its disintegration through inhuman role constraints, the colonization of existence, the parcelization of time and space, the upholding of the purported objectivity of consciousness over the flux of the unconscious. The progressive separation-estrangement of the masculine from the feminine, and of the feminine from itself results in the fictional appearance of woman on the scene; results in the disappearance of pleasure, which is seen as feminine and nonproductive, rather than economic and productive. Woman becomes the opposite of something else, the opposite of a man, therefore a being that cannot exist by herself. A move to help us go beyond the stage of not-being-fully-realized yet no-longer-lacking-something must be the rejection of the vision of ourselves as women-holes, women separated from our livable feminine, and therefore condemned to the non-livable. This entails disrupting the usual usual manner of speaking, narrating, by means of incisive, forceful fragments of desires, dreams, unconscious states. It entails refraining from the whining accounts of one’s misery, attacking the mechanism that not only produces repression in the unconscious, but that represses the unconscious itself. This calls for a project to research the diversity of women, not their identity. It entails capsizing the reality principle and considering desires the true reality...”

– Marilina

But desire, such a magic word, sometimes expresses itself in a strange manner, as a “suspension” of desire.

“It is not easy to talk about sexuality; however, we stubbornly switch from the psychosomatic code to the linguistic one hoping to compare a greater number of experiences. The opposition woman-man, the ancient root of our disfranchisement, of our obstructed self-assertion, impinges on our workaday reality, forcing us to make painful choices, and, often, approximate ones, causing the separation to appear hard and problematic. In my life, as a woman who long ago rejected the role of reproducer of the species, the alienation of motherhood, who chose to be separated from man even sexually, the sense of oppression continues, leaving me with rare moments of lucidity, when I realize that my negative relationship with the world derives from

the fact that I introjected the law of “*do ut des*,” in producing, if even just an image of myself, in order to show to myself that I exist.

So while the drive to produce still lingers within me in the form of a necessity to create, the annoyance and the futility of a quantifying test of myself drive me into a state of sexual “suspension,” apparently devoid of needs and desires, but critical and active nonetheless.

I do not know how one comes out of such a quantitative abstraction of life. The certainty of a theory or the acquisition of practice does not reassure me. I only know that every time I move away from this “suspension,” my emotions wane and I become more aware of my oppression.

– Bianca

Then one looks for a way beyond, for stepping beyond oneself, for ways to use the body as a bridge.

UTOPIA, PROBABLY

“The pleasure I am talking about is something more than pleasure; it is something in excess of it, not the satisfaction of a desire, but something that exceeds the possibilities that desire had foreseen. Something that, starting from totality, ends up exceeding it: a totality without remainder, a sum without exclusion, a place with no limits. A sense of *comblement*, probably, a sense of fullness that goes beyond that of a cup already full to the brim. The copresence of all the fullness and emptiness I am able to feel I am. A relationship with myself that works perfectly. Ecstasy. One in tune with the whole, without the need of explanation. To get in touch with the whole without feeling overpowered. My body occupies a space that feels right. I am my body. It is a duration, time disappears. Death is no longer measurable. I do not wonder any more if I am realized, fulfilled, if I correspond to what I think I should be. I am not any more at the planning stage. Not an abstract identity, but existence, not a focusing but a diffusion. Everything within everything else, everywhere, always at the same time. *Comblement* is not planned any more, it is not a goal to reach, it is an excess, an extra.”

— The women of Studio Ripetta

One may object: “What narcissism!” Why not! Since representation is history, and women have never been history, but just “*le repos du guerrier*,” a warm lap to come back to, then why not start creating a character out of ourselves!

Little comedy in one act:

To Be or Not to Be

After a whole day spent at the television center, pushed from the first floor to the second, then back again to the first, going around in circles and getting nothing accomplished, Antonella and I drove back downtown.

Since Antonella is angry, and when she is, she usually goes and lets it out through exercise, she doesn't come along to our meeting. She drops me off, not at the bus stop, but on the opposite side of the street, even though it's raining cats and dogs. So I say to her: “Watch. I'm going to act out our depression.” I get off, cross the street calmly, then I stand under the stop sign, erect, at attention, with my head high, like a heroine, amidst the amazement of the bystanders, who are huddling around their umbrellas, and those without one, who stand flat against a building to find shelter. I feel beautiful, slandering on the curb, as though on a ship's upper deck. Out of the

corner of my eye, I see Antonella laugh, go into first gear, and drive away.

When I arrive at the meeting, soaking wet, Marinella is frightened: “What happened?” I tell her, she laughs. I try to represent myself, act out the inconsistencies, contradictions, how I play, desire, labor. It’s not enough for me just to give an account of myself. Behind that pointing finger, raised to accuse, I want to hear not only “I heard you!” but also “I saw you!” Yes, this character of mine is positively political.”

– Alessandra

TO GEORGIANA

In Rome the Feminist Movement has always been given a political label, appropriately so for a Movement that negotiates for women. Rome has been the place of the great demonstrations, of the occupation of the Women's House, of the organized struggle in the hospitals to guarantee the right to abort. The debates within the Movement have always taken into account the problem of the "outside," the "outside" meaning the "institutions," "male politics," "the relationship with the other oppressed." And in Rome, more than everywhere else, women brought about the eruption of major contradictions within the parties of the extreme and institutional left. It is here they participated in the Movement's meeting of 1977. It is in Rome Giorgiana Masi, at seventeen, died on March 12, 1977, assassinated during a protest march. Her feminist comrades could just write poetic words in her memory, but they covered every wall with them, to keep the memory alive.

...IF THE OCTOBER REVOLUTION

HAD BEEN IN MAY

IF YOU WERE STILL ALIVE

IF I WERE NOT IMPOTENT IN THE FACE OF YOUR ASSASSINATION

IF MY PEN WERE A VICTOR'S WEAPON

IF MY FEAR EXPLODED IN THE SQUARES

A COURAGE BORN OF THE ANGER STRANGLING IN MY THROAT

IF HAVING KNOWN YOU WOULD BECOME OUR STRENGTH

IF THE FLOWERS WE GAVE

TO YOUR COURAGEOUS LIFE IN OUR DEATH

WOULD AT LEAST BECOME WREATHS

IN THE STRUGGLE OF ALL US WOMEN

IF...

IT WERE NOT WORDS TRYING TO AFFIRM LIFE

BUT LIFE ITSELF, WITHOUT ADDING MORE.

ON POWER, ITS REFUSAL, ITS VULGARITIES

We were talking about politics, which also implies organization. Consequently, the big problem of power came in. The power of the opposition man/woman and woman/woman.

“What bothered me most was the continuous repetition of “we are half, we are half, we are half.” Are we half or do we want half? Are we half of the clear, beautiful, wild, but never conventional sky, or do we want to eat our half of the cake here on earth. I do not want half of what there is today, of those values I refuse and fight. I want the unity of the sky, even though I am only half the sky. I do not refuse anything, I want everything. But I do not want what exists already, I want what I create, what is created through struggle.”

— Lia

“If one grants the inevitable distortions faced in talking about the vast theoretical, practical aspects of the Movement, one can then summarize in three fundamental points all the themes on power: 1) analysis of power and of the powers of the male society divided in classes; 2) analysis of the power relations created within the Women’s Movement; 3) the elaboration of a liberation plan with regard to power. In other words, in accordance with the feminist attention paid to the known dynamic forces intrinsic in every human aggregation, and to its usual repetition of the Oedipal triangle, women are slowly investigating the power wielded by the father-mother side, and the prospect, now still utopian, of a social collective independent from the rules of the Oedipal game.

From the streets, theoretical and strategic problems are transferred to the small space of little groups and collectives. Does the women’s revolt aim at a greater acquisition of power or at its total refusal? Will the obdurate search for “identity,” the “new subjectivism,” bring about new independence, male and female, and lead to the consequent disappearance of sexual roles, because they will prove useless? Or, on the contrary, will it become the social basis for a new female power?

An analysis of the subjective intentions of the Movement will reveal its anti-reformist character: individual emancipation and emancipation as a political program are rejected because considered an expression of integrationist subordination and a source of division among women.

Within political collectives, and also in small consciousness-raising or depth-analysis groups, the masculine and feminine roles, the maternal and paternal roles recreate themselves through the intricate inter-relationships of leadership and delegation, complicity and discomfort that emerges from the progressive discovery of individual differences. As soon as the political definition of “identity against” collapses and the male *qua* opposition fuses with a hypothetical “outside,” it is the inside of the collective that is threatened by a reflection of the male-female bipolarity, under the guise of aggression-passivity. The woman who is able to take the floor more easily becomes, in the Movement, a typical figure of male power. Power, in fact, takes the form of a tendency to exclude someone different from oneself and to solidify a collective usage into linguistic and ideologic norm. Word power is therefore exerted by women who appear to be sexually repressed and with dependency needs.

Since the exercise of power always refers to a relationship of seduction and therefore to reciprocal dependency, the reverse of “word power” is “silence power,” springing from old feminine seductive guiles (beauty, sweetness, emotionality, instinctivity). Anyway, what feminism intuits is that the first type of domination which is considered the more dangerous because ‘more introjected and omnipresent,’ is not less real than the second, since it too is a distorted and partial reflection of the real relationships of power active in the so-called “outside.”

— Biancamaria

WHAT OF THE BIG DEMONSTRATIONS? 50,000 WOMEN IN THE STREETS

A special date was November 1976. For the first time Roman women would take to the streets, not to claim something, but to make a direct affirmation of their presence. Together they would claim the night for themselves. This demonstration followed three days of debates, when the discovered unity of Roman feminism became manifest as a practical possibility of collective work. In short: a high point of the Movement. From that moment on, we would be facing new problems, but let's go back to the demonstration.

"Roman feminists marched at night against violence. Many were heavily made up. The group went through the neighborhood of Stazione Termini, Rome's train terminal, a place frequented by the poorest prostitutes, a place of the most profound and public submission. Mimicking prostitution, the visceral and nightly feminine, cut off from the awareness of itself, enacted, behind the screen of upturned signification, under its own eyes and those of the men waiting in ambush on the sidewalks, the usual ceremony of the come-on. In so doing, the Roman feminists experienced prostitution, 'retravelling' the condition of the harem.

A march in the night. The women hollered Third-World come-ons, pressing close, huddling, bearing torches. Clothes were used as a sexual signal, a negative one for the men who watched on the sidewalks, a positive one for the women. Repossessing, claiming prostitution, 'retravelling' our condition of sexual signals, facing the provocation coming from the sidewalk, from the 'outside', meant facing collectively, politically the tunnel of regression. Being with other women, experiencing again the condition of imprisonment, the intimacy that blinds and divides, the impossible communication of contact; going beyond the historical ritualism, the oblique expression (Achilles' slaves mourn 'using Patroclus as a pretext/each her own sorrow'); penetrating deliberately the aphasia that tries to remedy its shortcomings through body language; all this means experimenting, in a conscious and explicit way, the inevitable, non-programmatic solidarity of the regressive condition. It is regression with a progressive value that the Women's Movement introduces in the political universe."

– Elisabetta

As we were saying, something had to change. It is the beginning of the clash between the women for the Movement and those who gravitate toward Autonomy. The problem of violence, the handling of women's violence, the use of force become divisive issues at every meeting. The Movement loses its homogeneity with regard to the "outside." The new debate must deal with terrorism, the armed struggle.

MY FACELESS HOPES

"I would like to begin by paraphrasing Artaud, by saying that never more than today has there been so much talk about the State and politics, when it is life itself that escapes us. There is a strange parallelism between the generalized collapse of life which is at the core of the present discouragement, and the problem of a political course of action that never harmonized with life, and that is imposed on it. Two years ago, when we came out, almost en masse, of the new-leftist organizations, we more or less said the same things. Today we still say that we must talk about life, perhaps not aiming at discovering in the midst of the day-to-day reality the existence of that "feminine identity" that we carried/carry glued to our skin, which, one day, in different times, we defined as "woman is beautiful."

But I do not think that to proceed straight, to have, if we only want, hopes, we must prefigure something: our identity, the state, life. After all, I do not think that it is even necessary to program them. I do not think that our future planned/planable identity is a set of mosaic pieces, a series of assembled little victories. I do not believe in any form of survival one is able to come up with when the need arises. Yet, most certainly, I constantly live with the forms of survival I make up as I go along. Hopeless? No, hope is the last to die, but I must admit that these hopes of mine are faceless, and why not, timeless.

Nothing is more attached to the past than our imagination, My past, everybody's past, I only accept it as a learning process. I categorically reject it as nostalgia. The nostalgia of those who would rouse our affection for the state and enclose us in organizations, as women, workers, young people, families, etc. The nostalgia of those who would muster us for an armed struggle and organize us in brigades, nuclei, lines.

A geometry that, to be sure, rejects a self-transparency made up of truths and certainties over that achieved through the effort to know oneself, the difficulty to endure the discovery of the nonlinearity of ourselves, the discovery of our multiplicity, the effort exerted not to kill any part of ourselves.

The destructuring of thought concerned with finality, i.e. planning, projection, world view, seems to me an obligatory step to remove from ourselves the weight of ideology, a necessary step to arrive at the process of creation. For this reason, we must live with our continuous inventions of survival, without strongly believing in them, but, at the same time, without the negativity of letting ourselves merely exist. Our faceless hopes are the only possibility to know, love, acknowledge ourselves and to be able to love. Maybe I am only speaking of my life, but I want to speak of my life. Going back to Artaud, I want to add that today it is unthinkable for us who

have undertaken a physical and cognitive journey that took us through factories, neighborhoods, local and national meetings; a journey that went on inside us, in the unmasking of our personal relationships; we who concerned ourselves with the politics of the great systems down to the politics of dish-washing; we who analyzed dynamic forces and the subconscious, as I was saying, it is unthinkable for us not to place at the center of our analysis life itself, and not any longer “what is the right identity in order to live.” Around us we see alternative survival tactics, idealized and ideologized: from creative workers to heroin addicts, to those who practice “the refusal of work,” to those who choose to be Communist fighters. In the face of these Choices, all with capital ‘c’, because, in the end, they kill all other possible choices, how can we talk about the political crisis without talking about our ideas on life?”

Even a debate on terrorism is organized.

“First I would like to analyze the “political” side of terrorist action, which comes within that category of political strategies rejected by us women; loss of control on the lower levels, absolute delegation, total and absolute split of the political from the private; a political course of action that forces one to an either/or situation – with us or against us. On violence, I would like to hear more concrete discussions, without lapsing in such abstractions as ‘everything is violence,’ ‘everybody practices it.’ Nor do I consider it right that those who reject the planned and specific type of violence must right away be labeled pacifists. I am not a pacifist, but I believe that political choices must be made in the present, now. From a general historical point of view, there is an enormous difference between homicides and the political violence practiced now, and a situation of revolutionary mass violence. We are forced to the usual modes of survival: either total emancipation, total identification with man or becoming super-emancipated terrorists or super-emancipated women within State institutions, in the midst of the usual forms of ‘emargination.’ I think, therefore, that it is vital not to remain silent, but to denounce, as we have always done, even this form of physical and political violence. Since political violence is denounced nowadays by those in power in a generic and ‘instrumentalized’ manner, to serve their political aims, only we women can reiterate the condemnation of the various levels of violence of which the physical type is just the tip of the iceberg. Just as we have learned that rape is a repressive weapon turned against women, since it keeps fear alive and with it high levels of moral and psychological violence practiced on women.

Let us go back, therefore, we women, to denounce the levels of violence one wants to hide, and our complicity, too. Let’s denounce all that through the centuries has kept us divided and incapable of rebelling; the present attempt to assert ourselves on the level of emancipation, a level for which we don’t possess yet a plan and a fight strategy. In fact we are, on the subject of emancipation, still divided and subordinate to man. In the Movement we condemned emancipation as a simple request of equality to man, an equality that proves to be false, because it forces us to be equal to him

in work, sexuality, choice of values, robbing us of our identity. However, criticism of emancipation has only remained theoretical, because it is still to be translated in a practice that would help handle our individual relationship with work, politics, man.

– Michi

One more statement.

“To give an example, I will say that I have asked myself what I would do if I met an ex-terrorist along the way and if she needed help, i.e. a house, a little affection, someone to trust, that is. Well, I think I would help her with great fear to ‘make a new start,’ as the expression goes. Fear of what? To become part of the political persecution that hits anyone suspected of being a fellow traveller. The fact is that, because of this fear, I would fall into a pattern of behavior that as a woman I know well, the one used by mothers with their daughters when they cover up for them with father: ‘I will help you, but you must guarantee that you won’t get me in trouble.’ That amounts to being a kind of father substitute, which in this case is the State. Worse, one becomes a moral and guilt-producing figure. Fine result after so many years of struggle when I proclaimed with others the respect for diversity. The fact is that, in the hypothetical case put forth, the diversity would be reduced to nil, if not by me or the woman in question, by the logic of terrorism itself; ‘with me or against me.’ Undoubtedly terrorism must be rejected through words and actions because it does not propose but impose. But I have many doubts about the fact that the female presence in terrorist organizations is totally to be ascribed to the subordinate character of the women who made that choice. Behind it, I believe, there is a subjective and objective situation. If I just go back two years, the memory emerges of the big break among women. Feminists clearly split from the supporters of Autonomy, a break that marked a division not only between two ways of understanding women’s politics, but also between two generations. What has happened since then? We have talked so much between emancipation and liberation. To be emphatic, between the two words we put a dash, useful visually but too vague practically; perhaps we have to start from here to understand what is happening among women now.

Emancipation, in our country, implies going through a political organization much more than the job world. The ‘double militancy’ has been a specifically Italian phenomenon, because in the opposition between emancipation and liberation, the political militancy in the organizations has been for many of us the only thing that saved us from dangling in the abyss that divided us from liberation, in the absence of a bridge. Now the question arises if, in the last two years, we have gone all out to develop a plan of action that will not systematically exclude many women different from us because of age and social level. I firmly believe that feminism has transformed society, and I would add, all women in an irreversible manner; however, I do

not believe that our political strategies have been sufficiently modified by the coming on the scene of different feminist levels. For this reason nowadays it is no longer possible to define a woman as being more feminist than another. The same phenomenon of feminist terrorism, in fact, goes back, in part, to the radical way in which we disassociated ourselves from every kind of institutional politics during the last years.

When political disintegration is great, it is hard to single out the enemy with precision, so that one turns to the most symbolic and eternal enemy there is: the State. I believe instead that feminism has still a lot to say about the nature of the opposition, and I also believe that it can be defined in more present terms behind what disguise the eternal enemy is hiding. According to me, this must be done quickly, because it is an illusion that the thousand streams that form feminism at this time will automatically become a single great river. Some of these streams are already becoming big lakes where the consciousness of many women stagnates.

– Manuela

At this point my memory becomes presence. And if one must talk about presence, one must do so in a different manner. The right side and the reverse of our history are mixed, and if one remembers the right side any more, one speaks about it more easily, as these writings bear out. Without doubt, it is the reverse – the changes, the sensibilities, the dynamic forces – that sets the pace, the return of possibility. So then of the presence one will speak some other time.

from semiotext(e)'s excellent *autonomia: post-political politics*, scanned in by yadira lopez, proofed by a.dub

les pétroleuses were the unsavory bitches of the paris commune whose 'love of riot' burnt paris to the ground.
pétroleuse press is a riot-loving feminist collective in brooklyn saving up for our own offset printing press.
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